

sentence, 'For me to live is ...' What is it that motivates us in our lives? Is it that we might be prepared for an eternity spent in the presence of God? Our goals and ambitions are of course reflected in what we do with our lives.

5. We need to recognise the need to repent of the unmentioned sins that hold us in thralldom to this world. As Christians we are very good at commending ourselves for not being adulterous, murderous, etc. But very often we are, in reality, in the grip of the sins that don't hit the headlines. Those sins such as greed, envy, pride, selfish ambition, the love of pleasure, etc. Although such sins are easily ignored they have a devastating effect upon us as they draw our hearts away from God and towards the world.
6. We need to think often of how our lives will appear when we must give an account before Christ. There are many sections of Jesus teaching which confront us with this reality that we must come before Him and give an account. We must have before us the question of how our lives will then appear. We must look upon our lives now as they will appear in eternity. We must recognise that the New Testament also teaches that we are rewarded in accordance with the faithfulness of our stewardship.
7. We should meditate often upon heaven itself. We should think not just about this life but also about the life to come. We should think about what it will mean to be in heaven where Christ our Saviour is seated at the right hand of God.

Heaven is not the consolation prize at the end of our lives. Rather for the Christian it is the goal of our lives. It is what we live and strive for – to be with Jesus. As such it should not be something we think about occasionally but it should be something that stands at the very centre of our lives. We should learn to say with Paul, 'I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.' (Philippians 3:13,14)

David Luke, *Gilnahirk Baptist Church*
<http://www.gilnahirkbaptist.org.uk>, 12 December 2007

Getting Heaven in Focus

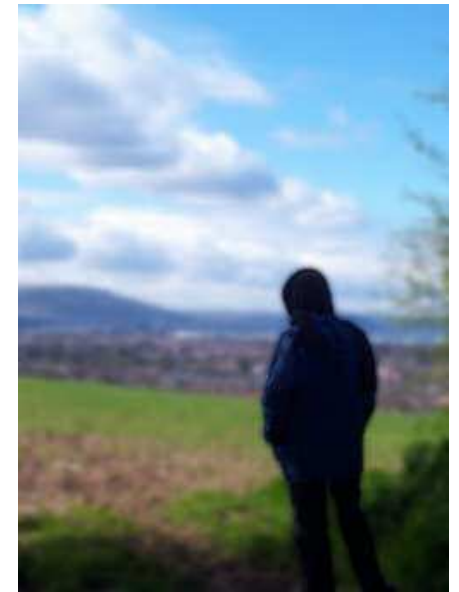
Living in the comfortable western world heaven is a distant prospect for many of us, even Christians. As Christians we often find it difficult to urge others to prepare for heaven when we spend little time thinking about it or preparing for it ourselves. Sometimes we berate ourselves for not being more heavenly-minded but such guilt trips are soon set aside as the more pressing matters of day to day living come in upon us. So how can we become more focussed upon heaven? That is the question that this leaflet hopes to help us explore.

Making Sure we have Grasped the Gospel

Perhaps one of the key reasons that we fail to get heaven into a proper focus is that we have not grasped the gospel itself. So before we think about heaven we need to think about the gospel.

Thinking about the gospel takes us right back to the book of Genesis. There we see humanity created as the divine image bearer and the very pinnacle of God's good creation. We are created for God's glory. When man fell into sin he both became estranged from God and also fell short of the very great purpose for which he had been created.

At the heart of the gospel therefore is the message of man's restored relationship with God and man's reinstatement to the purpose for which God first created him. The forgiveness of sins, eternal life and heaven are all consequences, one might even say by-products, of redemption but they are not the great goal of God's activity. The great goal of God's saving activity is the restoration of our relationship with Him so that we might once again display His glory.



Consequently if we think of the gospel as anything less than a restored relationship with God in which we are being re-created for His glory we have missed the point. If we think of the gospel purely in terms of what is in it for us – happiness, heaven, inner peace, etc. we have missed the point. These things are not the end for which God has saved us; they are the consequences of being in a right relationship with God.

So we need to ask ourselves in the first instance if we have grasped the gospel. Do we understand that the heart of the gospel is the message of our restored relationship with God so that we might once again display His glory by finding our purpose in Him?

Understanding Heaven

If we grasp the central idea of the gospel then that casts heaven in a rather different light than the one in which we are apt to think about. For many people heaven is not the *goal* of the Christian life it is simply the *end* of the Christian life. In other words it provides them with a better alternative than hell. Heaven appears as a soft landing on the other side of death. Yet that is not how the Bible portrays heaven.

In the Bible heaven is the place where God dwells and supremely displays His glory. All who inhabit heaven live for the praise of His glory. In other words what makes heaven heavenly is not simply the fact that it is free from the ill-effects of sin but that it is where God dwells in the full display of His glory. Consequently Christians live for heaven not because it is a better alternative to hell but because there they will see God face to face. There they will enjoy God's glory and rejoice in that glory forevermore.

Again we must ask ourselves whether or not we have grasped the nature of heaven? We can answer that question by considering how far we see heaven as the goal of our lives here and now and not just where we go when we die. Do we live our lives here and now with an orientation towards God? Is all that we hope for focussed upon being with God and being delighted in Him?

Our failure to grasp the nature of the gospel and the nature of heaven shows how easily the Christian message of salvation can become distorted. That we can easily turn it into little more than a form of self-preservation rooted not in a desire for God's glory but our own comfort.

Getting our Orientation Right

Whilst it is easy to beat ourselves because of our failure to live with a heavenly focus it is much more important that we restore our heavenly focus. Below are some ways in which we might seek to get our focus right.



1. We need to see that the essential story of the Christian life is told in Hebrews 11. That is, that we are those who are passing through this world to that permanent city which God has prepared for us. As such we need to re-orientate our lives around the central biblical message that we are aliens and strangers on earth who have no abiding city here. Most travellers tend to travel light and we need to learn what it means to travel lightly through this world.
2. We need to remind ourselves that life is short. We need to remember in the words of Isaiah that, 'All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field, the grass withers and the flowers fall...' In our society, where people live as if they will never die we as Christians must be realists who recognise life for what it is – brief.
3. We need to have before us the question, how should we then live? If we are a pilgrim people on a short journey through life then we must consider how we should then live. The stranger in a strange land who is passing through has a very different lifestyle from that of the permanent resident. We need to learn what it means, in Peter's words, to live our lives as strangers here in reverent fear. Also we must learn what it means to abstain from the sinful desires which war against the soul.
4. We need to examine our lives at the level of our goals and ambitions. We should think about how we would complete Paul's famous